

Translating the novel Celda 211: particular issues with multiple first-person narrators and colloquial language

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I certify that all material in this dissertation that is not my own work has been identified and that no material is included for which a degree has previously been conferred upon me

Abstract

In general terms, this dissertation proposes a strategy for translating colloquial narrative and its associated characterisation in prose literature. More specifically, the aim is to analyse the multiple first-person narrative styles and idiolects present in the Spanish novel *Celda 211* and put forward a strategy for representing these different voices in British English translation. It is hoped that this approach will succeed in preserving the personality and originality of the characters and their various unique perspectives on the story. The analysis accompanies my translation of the first 15,000 words of the novel, approximately.

The dissertation will address the particular problems posed by first-person narrative and in creating distinctive narrative voices, with particular reference to translating colloquial language, which is both a common characteristic of first-person narrative and an especially salient feature of *Celda 211*.

Arguably, *Celda 211* is a particularly good exercise in colloquial narrative translation because one of its narrators in particular, Malamadre, almost exclusively uses highly colloquial language, presented orthographically in a way that accentuates this effect, so the translator must tackle some extreme examples of the problems that arise in translating this type of literature, which effectively represents natural speech.

The issues addressed include the differences between the narrators' characterisation in terms of identity and register, the differences and similarities between colloquial narrative and natural language, the complexity of non-standard language, the differences between languages in the relative frequency of features and the problems posed by dialect, sociolect and idiolect. In addressing these issues, the aim is to cover all the main difficulties pertinent to translating colloquial prose and multiple first-person narrators.

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Translating the novel *Celda 211*: particular issues with multiple first-person narrators and colloquial language

In general terms, this dissertation proposes a strategy for translating colloquial narrative and its associated characterisation in prose literature. More specifically, the aim is to analyse the multiple first-person narrative styles and idiolects present in the Spanish novel *Celda 211* and put forward a strategy for representing these different voices in British English translation. It is hoped that this approach will succeed in preserving the personality and originality of the characters and their various unique perspectives on the story. The analysis accompanies my translation of the first 15,000 words of the novel, approximately.

As an exercise in prose literature translation, Francisco Pérez Gandul's novel *Celda 211* presents an opportunity to work with three distinct narrative voices, since the author tells the story through the eyes of three different characters in the book. This dissertation will address the particular problems posed by first-person narrative and in creating distinctive narrative voices, with particular reference to translating colloquial language, which is both a common characteristic of first-person narrative and an especially salient feature of *Celda 211*. As a strategy it will show that to overcome these problems the translator must find appropriate ways to render idiolect, dialect, colloquialisms, idiomatic language, slang, taboo language and non-standard orthography and punctuation, all of which will be discussed in reference to the novel. The importance of these linguistic and textual features lies in the fact that they constitute the author's portrayal of his character-narrators, or in other words they are an integral part of the very characterisation of the protagonists of the book. Without these features in their speech characters are not who they are.

The novel tells the story of a prison riot in modern-day Andalusia as experienced by three characters: the protagonist *Juan* or *Calzones* (Juan or Long Johns), a new prison officer who passes himself off as an inmate after getting caught up in the riot; *Malamadre* (Badmother), the top dog among the prisoners who plans and instigates the riot; and *Armando*, another prison officer helping the police deal with the situation. A particular difficulty in *Celda 211*, therefore,

with its triple-first-person-narrative makeup, lies in avoiding a normalisation of these three voices, which would inevitably occur if the defining idiolectal features of each narrator were not rendered. Not only would this detract from the literary quality of the product in English, but also neutralise an overriding characteristic of the book, namely that the events described are seen from three different psychological perspectives.

Furthermore, each narrator, aside from being a different character, tells his story both from a different time perspective and, more importantly as far as register-related issues are concerned, with a different addressee. This is where an understanding of the influence of sociolinguistic and contextual factors on speech is essential. This dissertation will show that in order to attempt to reproduce the linguistic and literary merits of a work of first-person narrative and to create a high-quality literary product for a new market, the translator must have a specialised awareness of these sociolinguistic and context-driven determinants of colloquial language.

Thus, as a strategy, this dissertation will address the sociolinguistic factors that determine the ST author's choice of language in his colloquial narration and analyse the linguistic and sociolinguistic forces exerted by the TL locale (Dols and Mansell, 2009). In doing so, it aims to provide an appropriate solution to the linguistic and sociolinguistic differences that pose a problem in translation. It will show that the differences in question relate to the makeup of each language in terms of the range of their lexical sets, the distribution or relative frequency of features within each system and the social connotations of colloquial features; these are what determines the choices made by the translator of colloquial prose.

Arguably, *Celda 211* is a particularly good exercise in colloquial narrative translation because one of its narrators in particular, Malamadre, almost exclusively uses highly colloquial language, presented orthographically in a way that accentuates this effect, so the translator must tackle some extreme examples of the problems that arise in translating this type of literature, which effectively represents natural speech. However, this dissertation also takes into account the idea that in literature even the most colloquial language is merely an *emulation* of natural speech and that, inevitably, for the purposes of clarity and aesthetics, literary prose must have certain 'higher' qualities, avoiding features of everyday speech that would make the product unsuitable, or at the very least undesirable, for a literary genre (Lodge, 1992: 18). Even in cases of

exceptionally colloquial narration, the translator is still very much a literary translator, requiring all the attributes that the job normally entails. As any linguist knows, at a purely linguistic level colloquial language is no less complex than highly formal or literary language, and indeed arguably it is often more complex in terms of the multi-layer semantic content and multiple pragmatic functions of lexical items and other features, as well as the often tenuous relationship between the literal, propositional and expressive meanings of colloquial words or phrases.

This dissertation proposes that, for the purposes of translating colloquial and non-standard language, the most significant differences between Spanish and English (and by extension any two separate languages) are:

- Completely different literal (and/or metaphoric) meanings that denote equivalent or comparable propositional and expressive meanings.
- Considerable differences in the frequency of usage (and therefore the markedness) of features. This includes collocational frequency: how often certain words are combined with certain other words.
- Differences in the social undercurrents of 'equivalent' features.

These differences, which lead to what Baker (1992: 18-19) terms *non-equivalences*, in the range and distribution of the lexical sets of each language must be taken into account if the final product is to be a convincing or, in other words, realistic and natural sounding, work of literature.

The narrators and their characterisation: differences in identity and register

It has already been stated that in the case of first-person narration there are sociolinguistic factors, albeit fictional ones, that determine the language that the author, and therefore the translator, uses for each narrator. It is essential that the translator has an awareness of these factors and the particular way they influence the language of each narrator as part of their very characterisation. Furthermore, in the case of *Celda 211*, it would be fair to say that the differences between the three narrators in the constraints applied by these factors lie at the root of what makes their voices distinct from one other. This distinction is paramount because it enables the reader to view the story through the eyes of three very different people. Naturally

this is not just a matter of visual perspective, but also of moral perspective. Each viewpoint is shaped by its narrator's social values and these values are expressed to the reader not just in what the narrators say but also in the way they say it.

Most evidently, each narrator has his own personal and social characteristics: gender, age, intelligence, level of education, geographical origin, social and professional status etc. Everyone is aware that these factors influence the way a person speaks. Thus, Calzones is in his late-twenties, from a Northern Spanish rural background, intelligent, sensitive etc. Armando is late middle-aged, an experienced professional, holds a position of authority but is humble and kindly. Malamadre is in his early forties, urban Andalusian, from a severely underprivileged background, a hardened criminal, a violent murderer, a long-term prisoner, a leader within his world of inmates and criminals. It goes without saying that each of these character traits has associated modes of linguistic expression or, in other words, sociolects: idiolects that adopt certain features that identify the speaker with specific social groups and statuses, or indeed disassociate them from groups they do not wish to be a part of (Crystal, 1995: 364-367). Consequently, while Armando speaks a relatively standard variety of Spanish and is content to adopt a formal manner of speech where appropriate, quite the opposite is true of Malamadre, who is a prominent member of an underworld class that does not hold this register in high esteem. The values this register represents belong to the classes and authorities that repress Malamadre's group, his perceived enemy, and consequently his idiolect amounts to an act of linguistic rebellion against the powers that be.

Perhaps less obviously to a layperson, the language of each of these character types is potentially further influenced by the immediate situation in which they are speaking and the role they are adopting at a given moment, owing to accommodation. In other words, a speaker's language either converges with or diverges from the hearer's language or the expected language in a given situation depending on whether they wish to associate themselves or disassociate themselves from the hearer, the hearer's social group or the situation itself (Holmes, 1992: 255-260). In the case of *Celda 211*, each narrator has a different addressee and it is safe to assume that this impacts upon the style of their narration and the register of their language. Arguably, effective rendering of these sociolinguistically driven features both by the author and the translator can only contribute to the realism of the text, to making the characters more

convincing, since such features are an inherent characteristic of natural speech. An awareness of the process accommodation in natural language is therefore highly relevant in translating *Celda 211*.

This said, in the case of *Celda 211*, it is not necessarily clear exactly when, where and to whom the narrators are speaking, although some important inferences can be made:

Malamadre, as a narrator, overtly addresses another prisoner, *Tachuela* (Studz), and therefore we can assume he is speaking in his in-group social persona. Moreover, since Tachuela is his sidekick and friend, and Malamadre is overtly a leading advocate of his own social group and its values, we can make a series of assumptions about the way in which he is happy to portray himself: brave, clever but not educated, intimidating and so on. His language shows his hearer that he is part of the same group and that he is not part of the 'other' group: the authorities and the educated class.

Juan's addressee appears to be himself (internally) and to some extent the reader (albeit not overtly), so his voice is more akin to that of a conventional first-person narrator, with less context-bound affectations than the other two; we might describe his prose as a narrative of the 'inner person'. Of course this does not apply to his speech in reported dialogue, which is shaped by the situation in question. Thanks to Juan's internal dialogue, which includes reminiscence and descriptive prose, he is established as the protagonist of the story, with his narration delving deeper into the character and eliciting more sympathy than the other two narrators.

Armando, on the other hand, is presented in a way that suggests he is reporting on the riot in some kind of semi-formal or professional context, using the polite plural form of address (*ustedes*) and speaking almost exclusively about the events at the prison themselves, rather than expressing unrelated personal thoughts like Juan. At one point Armando alludes to his addressee as having access to prisoner records (p. 18), so the reader is led to believe that the narrator *Armando* must be speaking in some kind of official capacity after the events have taken place. However, presumably for the purpose of producing a more affable narrative style, it is not a completely formal context; a purely formal register would be less expressive and less appropriate for reporting the more colloquial elements of dialogue between characters and

emotional responses. Armando even uses swear words in his narration. The author also makes plain the fact that Armando the narrator has an addressee other than himself or the reader via the use of second-person plural fillers such as *saben, entienden* etc. Official-sounding vocabulary (for instance *Yo realizaba gestiones para tratar de localizar Elena*), aside from contributing to his characterisation as a prison officer, helps to set the scene in his sections of narrative, in which he is surrounded by police officers, prison officers and government officials, seeing the story unfold from their point of view. The translator must therefore be very careful to adequately render this very specific formal register, while retaining its informal flavour.

Colloquial narrative versus natural language

Whilst a translator of colloquial narrative can draw a great deal from linguistics, there are some limitations to its applicability as a field that is primarily concerned with natural language. As Lodge (1992: 18) explains in reference to colloquial first-person narration, the aim is for the narrator to 'appear to be relating the story spontaneously,' but that this is of course an 'illusion' created by the author. Although creating the *effect* of real speech, any narration in a novel is a product of careful thought and redrafting by the author. Lodge (2002: 110) goes so far as to say that 'writers discover what it is they want to say in the process of saying it', i.e. retrospectively. If this were not the case, the product would lack intelligibility and literary quality; arguably the characters would lack intelligence. As Lodge (1992: 18-19) points out, 'transcripts of recorded conversations' can be 'virtually unintelligible'. When it comes to translating this kind of writing, much of the aforementioned literary quality is derived from the original, which naturally has been carefully constructed rather than spontaneously uttered; however, the translator must also consciously avoid falling into the trap set by the illusion, merely accepting that the product is a representation of natural speech and that it therefore does not require the same consideration as more 'literary' genres. In other words, the speech-emulating nature of the ST narrative is not justification for over-repetition, unintelligibility, marked features etc. in the TT when they are not present in the original. Moreover, the translator might even consider neutralising such features even when they are present in the original, since critics and readers of translations might think anomalies are a result of bad translation rather than an attempt to represent marked or non-standard language in the original. If this method is to be adopted

however, the translator must be extremely wary of its potentially normalising effect (Newmark, 1988: 206); perfect prose is not always the author's aim. In the case of Malamadre especially, excessive neutralisation of these features could easily destroy the desired effect, namely that he is an extremely rough and uncultured person.

Slang and complexity

Broadly speaking, non-standard language can be seen as complex in two ways:

- Slang is often characterised by **semantic complexity**, with concurrent metaphoric and literal meanings and considerable variation in meaning according to collocation and context.
- Slang is characterised by its **functional complexity**. It is used for 'at least 15 reasons' (Partridge in Crystal, 1995: 182).

As far as semantic complexity is concerned, a translator of colloquial narrative is often forced to decide which components of a term's semantic content are most important, since the semantic structure of equivalent terms differs between languages and some elements of meaning must therefore be lost. Equally, when this happens, inevitably other semantic components are gained. For instance, a term used extensively in *Celda 211* as a very common Spanish insult, *cabrón*, when used to mean simply *contemptible person* and translated as 'bastard' (although this is not always the case), loses its underlying meanings of *male goat*, *cuckold* and *intentionally annoying or cleverly deceptive person*, and gains the underlying meaning of *illegitimate person*. However, since the first meaning mentioned (*contemptible person*) has been deemed by the translator to be the primary meaning that the speaker intends, i.e. the propositional meaning, the remaining semantic content becomes secondary and is susceptible to being sacrificed. Continuing with the example of *cabrón*, when its internal semantic hierarchy varies according to context, for instance when *cleverly deceptive person* becomes its primary or propositional meaning, the translator must either choose a different term or add some kind of modifier (e.g 'sly bastard', 'clever bastard' etc). This specific example occurs several times in my translation because Malamadre uses the term in referring to Juan after the events, in reference to his clever deception.

This said, sometimes it is possible to preserve both the primary and secondary meaning of a term, or at least to find a TL term that has the same propositional meaning and a *similar* underlying meaning as the SL term. For instance, in my translation of *cuchitriles* for 'kennels' the propositional meaning of both words is *prison cell* and they also both have the underlying meaning of *an animal's den*. In addition, although the two terms are associated with different animals (pigs and dogs), both animals have a reputation for dirtiness. Moreover, the two terms can be identified with a prison sociolect (for 'kennel' see Devlin, 1996: 35) so they serve the same sociolinguistic function of in-group identification. The translation of *cuchitriles* for 'kennels' therefore provides a rendering for multiple layers of meaning simultaneously.

To sum up, propositional meaning is of overriding importance, given that a failure to translate it for an equivalent meaning would alter the main intentions of the speaker (in this case the narrator), and therefore potentially alter both plot and characterisation significantly. Secondary meanings may be sacrificed if necessary, but clearly it is desirable to render this underlying semantic content if at all possible in order to represent the ST as fully as possible. Having said this, naturally there are other factors that may influence the translator's decision that may or may not take precedence, the most important of which are discussed hereinafter.

In terms of the functional complexity of slang, it is widely accepted that non-standard language is used subconsciously or consciously by speakers for a long list of reasons that include group identity (as alluded to above in the case of 'kennels'), register shifting, secrecy and humour (Partridge in Crystal, 1995: 182). Mattiello (2009) divides these functions into speaker-oriented, hearer-oriented and intrinsic properties of slang. Mattiello understandably points out that, in keeping with House's model of equivalence which comprises both semantic and pragmatic correspondence between the ST and the TT, the translator must take into account these multiple functional properties of slang if the ST is to be adequately represented. However, in criticising certain translations for having failed to represent these pragmatic qualities of slang, Mattiello fails to acknowledge the possibility that other overriding factors pertaining to a wider context may justify the translator's decision. These could include issues relating to the speaker's overall characterisation (i.e. the fact that the pragmatic properties may be represented elsewhere in the character's speech), avoiding repetition, the relative markedness of terms

between the SL and TL etc. Mattiello's criticism focuses on slang terms in relative isolation from the wider text, from the TL and from the target locale as a whole.

In the case of *Malamadre*, who continuously uses swear words and other colloquial features as intensifiers and fillers, retaining the overall effect of these at paragraph level (or even text level) is, for the purposes of characterisation and creating a distinctive narrator's voice, far more important than each individual feature being represented in the TT by an equivalent that can be described according to the same 'descriptive criteria' (Mattiello: 74). This wider view of prioritisation in the decision-making process allows for changes in the position, frequency and nature of these semantically subordinate colloquial features in order fulfil the overriding aims of ensuring realistic colloquial structures in the TT and creating the desired effect in terms of characterisation.

Relative frequency of features

When translating colloquial prose, it quickly becomes apparent that the differences in the range of the lexical sets of each language and the frequency with which their lexical items are used in everyday speech are important in the decision-making process (Baker, 1992: 18). This is because, if the colloquial narration is to effectively emulate natural speech, it must represent the real-life lexical structure of the spoken language. In other words, overusing terms that are only infrequently used in the TL or under-using terms that are regularly used in the TL would result in unrealistic narration. Furthermore, the problem is not restricted to words; other features and collocations differ between languages in terms of their range or frequency of use (for instance, the gerund can often be used interchangeably with the infinitive in English but not in Spanish).

As far as relative lexical range and frequency are concerned, languages differ both in the number of variants within a lexical set and in the frequency of use of these variants, both in absolute terms and in relation to synonymous lexical items (or groups). In the case of Spanish and English, this is clearly exemplified by insults whose propositional meaning is, approximately, *stupid and/or contemptible person*. In English, for instance, there are multiple words of this type whose literal meaning is *penis*: 'prick', 'knob', 'cock', 'dick', 'penis'. This is not the case in Spanish (there

is only a subordinate link in one word, *gilipollas*), so there is a risk these terms might not be selected by the translator, even when translating a text like *Celda 211*, in which there are probably hundreds of insults with the same propositional meaning as 'prick' etc. If the items from this lexical set are overlooked by the translator for want of a more direct equivalent in the ST, the outcome would not reflect natural English: the words would be conspicuous by their absence. Equally, the very common Spanish insult *hijoputa*, which Malamadre uses extensively in the truncated form *joputa*, most resembles 'son of a bitch' in propositional and literal meaning, but is much more frequently used than its ostensible counterpart in British English (which is much more common in US English, of course). *Hijoputa* is therefore rendered with words that have a different literal meaning but a comparable propositional meaning and frequency of use. In turn, given that the TT term no longer has to have the same literal meaning, several different terms can be used by the translator if desired, depending on context or for the purpose of reflecting the wider lexical range described above. Thus, *hijoputa* can interchangeably be translated for variants such as 'prick', 'arsehole', 'mother fucker' etc, with or without intensifiers, always bearing in mind the natural frequency of each term in the TL and taking care to preserve the propositional meaning and expressive intensity of the source term.

From a practical point of view, translators must rely on their knowledge of the SL and TL for the purpose of finding the right balance in terms of frequency. Reference books might be able to provide synonyms, but they cannot indicate how often certain terms are used compared to their synonyms, nor exactly how synonymous they are.

Equally, it is useful for the translator to have an awareness of the sociolinguistic reasons that sometimes underpin relative frequency; features are used more or less frequently owing to cultural factors. Taboo words provide a clear example of this: words considered extremely rude might be used less frequently than other words with the same meaning, or more frequently if the desired effect is to shock the hearer. These attitudes towards expressions differ between languages; certain words might be considered much more offensive in one language than their obvious counterparts are in the another language. These cultural determiners of frequency must therefore be taken into account.

Dialect, sociolect and idiolect

In order to translate *Celda 211* and its multiple first-person narratives, it was important to establish a strategy for dealing with features of dialect, sociolect and idiolect. Malamadre in particular displays many examples of these three linguistic phenomena in his narration. Dialect takes the form of Andalusian lexis (e.g. *pitracó*) and pronunciation (represented by non-standard quasi-phonetic orthography). Sociolect is embodied in the language he uses pertaining to the underclass and prisoner class, and once again with non-standard spelling. And idiolectal variation appears as original and inventive non-standard expressions like *cagar grillos* (p. 48 in the ST). These three types of feature are therefore an important part of Malamadre's characterisation.

Dialect is a dilemma for translators because it identifies the speaker's geographical origin (Landers, 2001: 116-117). In the case of Malamadre, there is no way of expressing the fact he is Andalusian via linguistic features in the English translation, so unless it is overtly stated in the ST there is no way of identifying him as such. Equally, if the translator were to choose a comparable dialect (if such a thing exists) of the English-speaking world in which to portray the character, the effect would be to lift the story out of its setting and place it in a different country, or at least create a confusing world in which Spaniards, in this case, are identified with specific anglophone regions. Either way the readers' attention would be drawn to the fact that the TT is a translation.

As Landers (p. 117) indicates, in cases of 'extended passages in dialect' such as Malamadre's narration, the best course of action is to adopt a 'generalized adaptation to spoken discourse'.

Arguably, what Landers' suggested method amounts to is that it is possible to render sociolect without rendering dialect, or in other words to use class-specific and highly colloquial language that does not recognisably belong to one specific geographical area. This is the strategy that was decided upon for the purpose of translating Malamadre's narration. English, helpfully, already has some widely used non-standard forms, a kind of 'standard non-standard', which reflect natural speech, ranging from the prescriptively accepted contracted forms like 'can't', 'you'd', 'we've' etc, to less formally acceptable orthography like 'ain't', 'gonna', 'wanna', 'dunno' etc. In addition, given the orthographic deviance of the ST, it was decided that it would be appropriate, desirable even, to use other less widely used non-standard spellings: 'din't', 'wudna', 'geddit'

etc. However, since dialect and sociolect often overlap (i.e. they share unique features), the translator must ensure that the pronunciations reflected by this non-standard spelling are not ascribable to one specific regional variety of English; rather, they should be colloquial features that are potentially associated by the reader with several or all regions of the TT locale (in this case Britain). The same applies to vocabulary; the translator can use non-standard lexis but should avoid words that are especially identifiable as belonging to a particular region.

It is easy to find examples of translations in which dialectal forms in the ST are normalised into standard language in the TT. Andrea Camilleri's novel *La forma dell'acqua* (2004) is based in Sicily, and although its narrative and dialogue are in standard Italian they are peppered with Sicilian words, giving a flavour of the place. In his translation *The Shape of Water* (2004), for the reasons mentioned above, translator Stephen Sartarelli is forced to iron out these regional features, which accordingly are not represented in the TT. Only on one occasion, when a character speaks in pure Sicilian (as opposed to Sicilian-influenced Italian), does Sartarelli attempt to render the variation, using quasi-phonetic spelling to represent a non-standard form of English. Even then, he adds the phrase 'she said in thick dialect' to explain the strangeness (p. 210). One would imagine this was done because the use of Sicilian in this instance served as a sociolect, characterising the speaker as of low sociocultural status.

As far as features or expressions unique to a character's idiolect are concerned, the problem lies in their inventive nature, which makes non-equivalence more likely. This innovative usage might have subtle links to existing expressions, and presumably it is where language change is spawned; a new form is used by a speaker and it either catches on or it doesn't. Taking the example of *cagar grillos*, given the context there is a tenable link to the Spanish idiom *olla de grillos* (meaning a place of chaos and confusion), roughly equivalent to the English word 'madhouse'. However, since this is not something that a person could conceivably defecate, it is no longer a possibility for translation. A modified version of the common expression *the shit hits the fan* was used in my translation so that *para no cagar ladrillos* was rendered as 'so yer shit don't hit the fan', thereby preserving Malamadre's linguistic inventiveness. 'Shit crickets' was deemed inadequate since it would not allude to a well-known expression in the same way and its connotations would be rather obscure.

Cell 211

Francisco Pérez Gandul

'He's just fainted. Get his tie off and lift his legs up. If this is what happens to him on his first day, who knows what'll happen when Badmother shows him his teeth.'

What a disgrace. What will people think of me? I won't tell Elena, it will only worry her, and it's nothing, just nerves: the bloody anxiety that always grips me on my first day. It happened to me at school. I arrived, took one look at Miss Úrsula and puked right there on the desk, on Enrique's new folder. The bitter smell stayed with me all day, as if my nose were lined with bile, gloopy and revolting bile. It might happen now, the same knot in my stomach, the same feeling of suffocation, the same decay in the air. If I could get this waxiness out of my throat, I'd tell you it was nothing. Just nerves, the damn anxiety that always grips me on my first day. I knew it would happen. When I kissed Elena at the door to our home, I smiled, but the anguish was already there like a rope snaking around inside me, its ends wriggling after each other until they made a tight knot as I arrived at the entrance to the prison. 'It's a good opportunity,' my father said. 'You know what to expect here: misery from morning till night'. Two years preparing for the exam and, at the end of it, a letter from the Ministry of Justice: '... you have been assigned a post as prison officer at the Seville 2 penal establishment; you are to report to the chief officer on March 20 at 8 am.' It must be nine o'clock, but it's not the twentieth. 'I'll drop by on the nineteenth', I told Elena that day we ended up making love on the oak table in the kitchen. She was stirring the stewpot, a smell of cabbage in the air. Her dressing gown was half-open, showing me her thighs; 'you're making me horny', I said. She looked out the window and made sure her mother was still in the tomato plot. 'Just because of this?', she said with a playful look, opening her dressing gown. I could see her slit through her transparent panties. 'Come here,' I ordered. And she wrapped her legs around me, and the lettuces and oil fell off the table. 'Like in the *Postman Always Rings Twice*' she reminded me afterwards. 'Yeah,' I said to her, 'I'll drop in on the nineteenth so I don't get sucker-punched on my first day at work. I'll take a look at the prison and meet my new workmates.' It's the nineteenth today and it must be nine o'clock.

'How are you?'

'Dizzy.'

'Is it some kind of kind of illness?'

'No, it's just a funny turn.'

'When you can stand up we'll take you to see the nurse, okay?'

'There's no need, I'll be fine in a minute.'

Believe me when I tell you Juan Oliver is a good man. I knew as soon as I shook his hand that March morning. I thought he was probably around twenty-five years old; 'I recently turned twenty-seven,' he told me later. He was tall, with black army-cut hair and prominent square jawbones. He had the colouring of someone who'd worked long and hard in the fields, and his hands suggested he wasn't the sort to play the piano in the shade of the poplar trees. It wasn't me who was supposed to receive him, but he turned up a day earlier than planned, and the boss, José Utrilla, was off celebrating his saint's day. As second in command I went out to meet him. I remember clearly how shy he was, the nervous way in which he nodded to everything I said to him, and that half-smile, sincere but incomplete, that formed on his lips when, trying to break the ice, I told him a couple of prisoners' jokes, of the kind so old and stale they seem to hang from the cell bars like the broken tiles on the walls of a taberna. He felt awkward in the guardhouse. Germán Zafra, the most veteran officer, told him he should be careful wearing those clothes, grey trousers and a shirt with two pockets with flaps on the chest, in case he was mistaken for one of the inmates in Cell Block 5 and ended up in the 'cooler'. I remember how, along with Germán, who was in charge of the block that day, and Fermín Solano, another officer, I suggested we go on a tour of the prison facilities. I will never forget how tense he was as we walked down the wings. It was like those long corridors, flanked by the cells, made him claustrophobic. I was glad that, at that time, the inmates were enjoying their hour's exercise in the yard, because although he would have to get used to it, and the sooner the better, it was tough for newcomers (as I know all too well, my memory offering me overwhelmingly realistic images of my experience sixteen years back, at Dueso Prison) exchanging looks with them. And in that block the looks were hard, provocative, permanently defiant. He had just asked about the electronic system that locks the cells when I saw the sweat dripping down his temples towards his cheeks and his face go deathly pale. There was no time to ask him if he was okay. He

dropped down as though he'd plotted his fall with a plumb, his body just a heap of bones on the floor in an instant.

'Call the doctor,' said Germán.

'Don't be stupid, the infirmary's not far; we'll take him there to get looked at,' was Fermín's reply.

'No, let's put him in there till he comes round. Then we'll take him to see the nurse,' I ordered.

I curse the moment I didn't bloody listen to Fermín. He has reminded me of it many a time. 'I flipping told you, but his sodding lordship Armando Nieto is always right, isn't he.' But I didn't listen. We took him to Cell 211, which was empty, and laid him on the hard old bed.

'He's just fainted. Get his tie off and lift his legs up. If this is what happens to him on his first day, who knows what'll happen when Malamadre shows him his teeth,' Germán said, laughing.

And that was when it all began.

So who's this Badmother? I think I'm starting to see again. The haze is clearing like the massed clouds do back on the farm, slowly and parsimoniously drifting away, playing with the fields as though recreating a chessboard. The guy slapping my face is Germán. But who's this Badmother? Nobody with a name like that can have turned out a good son. 'A bad mother is the most wretched being there is; not even the most disgusting creature on God's earth doesn't love her son,' my own mother used to say. I miss her. Not even Elena fills that gap. I long for her tenderness, that ability she had to see without opening her eyes, and her strength. If she were here she'd say I've turned out like my father, that when something hurts it's like nobody has ever hurt so much, that I should stop my silly worrying and confront life as you must, face on and never losing sight of the green eyes of hope and the black eyes of ill fate, without being cocky but without ever becoming destiny's pawn. 'It may be that everything's written, son, but nobody can force us to write it ourselves,' and she looked at dad with those eyes that oozed honey and that, when filled with rightness, hardened into amber. I'm sure Badmother has never said such things about his mum. I think I can get up now.

'How are you?'

Dizzy, I told him. He seems like a good guy, this Armando; I think I'll get on well with him. He's unassuming and his honesty shows in his face. I thought my boss would be a tough nut. Having said that, I don't know what sort José Utrilla is yet; I'll have to ask Armando what he's like before I go home. It's always better to know what brush your bosses are tarred with so you don't put your foot in it at the first opportunity. What was that? Why's the alarm ringing?

'What's going on?', asked Armando Nieto over the walkie-talkie. 'What? We're in Block 5, are they coming this way?'

We can't be blamed for what happened. We're only human. I'd just asked what was going on when Germán and Fermín, who'd gone out onto the wing as soon as they heard the alarm, came back in a panic.

'Come on, quick, we've got to get out of here!' shouted Germán.

We couldn't take Juan with us. Fermín asked what we should do, but it was just a question. You see, he couldn't stand up. With him on our shoulders we wouldn't have been able to reach the security zone. Impossible. You can't cover fifty metres in a few seconds with a fourteen-stone bundle on your shoulders. And we could hear them running from the end of the wing. And shouting. Of course we shat ourselves. We've been here a long time and we know what Block 5's like; I'd rather a nest of vipers a thousand times over. What's more, some of them had had it in for us since the riot in 98. Remember? Ballerina slit the throat of that Arab who'd ripped him off a few days earlier by cutting his gram of coke with too much talc, and the Arabs decided to wage jihad. Ballerina wasn't a Christian, he had no soul, he was an animal, but Badmother, Spike and Gardel became his crusaders. We remember it well, very well indeed, fortunately, unlike Anselmo who was spitted on the spot as he tried to restrain Ballerina. They stabbed him thirty times; thirty, the forensic surgeon told us on the sly, and what can I say, Spike and Badmother were running our way and we had just enough time to try and reach the security zone.

'Run, for fuck's sake, run!' shouted Germán, and that's what we did.

We couldn't take Juan with us, please understand; better they get one of us than four. In 98 five died: Anselmo, three Arabs and Plasticine, and if they catch us they'll kill us. Fermín would definitely get it; Badmother had had him marked down since he rose to his threat by

telling him he could suck his balls. They'd have stuck his bollocks in his mouth if they'd caught him, in pieces like they did in the war in Morocco. And they almost did catch him; he slipped and hit his knee, but luckily Germán was behind him and dragged him through the gate. 'You saved my life my friend,' he said after hugging him. Badmother and Spike were banging on the bars and spitting, foaming at the mouth and screaming that they would get us eventually, that it was just a matter of time. And so the riot began. There was nothing we could do for Juan, you understand?

What's going on? I don't get it. My head's rolling, I must have ended up on my back. But what's happening? Why the alarm and the shouting? I can't hear what they're saying; it's all a daze. Where would they have gone? I heard Germán say something like 'we have to go'. But where did they have to go? My cheek's hurting. I'm bleeding. I must have fallen when I fainted. I know, I've scared them and they've gone looking for a doctor. I've never been good with pain. Fran and Cabrillas thought I was dying once. I'd made a great save but hit my head on the goalpost. The pain! I felt my life slipping away from me, as though my blood was rushing away from my head and trying to escape through my feet. And that sweet journey, so sweet, into nothing. 'Fucking hell, Juan, you were moving around weirdly, like you had lizard's tails wriggling round in your body.' 'A form of epilepsy,' the doctor diagnosed. 'It's triggered by pain and causes a short circuit in the vegetative nervous system.' I remember his words. That thing about the vegetative nervous system seemed serious, it was etched in my memory. I must have had those same convulsions. They'd have freaked out and gone looking for a doctor. Shit, but why did all three of them go? I'm going to get up.

'Who the fuck are you?'

'Who are you?'

'I'm Smacks.'

'Smacks?'

'Look, you piece of shit, stop asking questions and tell me who you are or I'll smash yer face in.'

'I'm Juan.'

'What you doing in 211?'

'They brought me here.'

From the security zone we saw Smacks go into 211 and we started praying. Smacks is scum of the earth, one of those characterless people who leech off bullies, manipulating them at their will. You know the type, you've seen plenty of them in the files: illiterate, violent but without initiative, needs the protection of the pack, a kind of 'do-it-all boy' for the leaders. A few years ago he really did *do-it-all*. His boyish features made him highly desirable, and what he lacked in brains he more than made up for with his arse. Not anymore, not since he got Aids. 'You've gone old and festering, you're not even good for a bitch any more,' Badmother often says to him in the canteen. And he smiles. Better to smile, you see, than to answer Badmother back. It was Smacks that went into 211. I pointed it out to José Utrilla, who'd just arrived.

'Have you called the chief?'

'Yes, Fermín did. He's on his way. We called the Ministry too. Special Ops won't be long.'

'What's the situation?'

'They have complete control of Block 5 and it looks like they've blocked off 4, which they can also get into. But that's not what worries me.'

'So what the hell is worrying you, Armando?'

'The new boy's in there.'

'What new boy?'

'The new member of staff, Juan Oliver.'

'He was supposed to be coming tomorrow!'

'But he came today. I was showing him the prison and he fainted; we put him on the bed in 211 and at that moment the riot went off. We had to leave him there, he couldn't move and those bastards were coming for us.'

'Shit, a hostage.'

'Let's hope he's not a dead hostage. Smacks has just found him, look.'

II

I don't give a fuck what they think to be honest, but Juan Oliver... what a pair of balls, balls of fuckin' iron, like I never seen before in the slammer... and I been here half my fuckin' life; never did anyone have balls as big or as solid, and I got balls too, right? But I know when credit's due to someone whose balls are bigger than mine... the fucker... he fucked me and double fucked all of you; he fucked yer so hard yer could use the knot on those ties yer wear to wipe yer arses, you're so fulla ties and so fulla shit, and it wouldn't even touch the sides... who's got a fag? I couldn't give a shit if yer don't wanna hear my life story, I say whatever the fuck I want and either yer listen or I just fuck off, they named me Vicente Tenorio Parla, but this is Badmother speaking, and I ain't gonna tell you the shit you wanna hear, but the truth, the truth of prison, the only truth that's worth anything in here, cos when you leave, if Smacks ain't cut yer throat first, you'll find your piece-a-shit truth on the outside, but in here there's just one, you better believe it, the one that means yer can put up with this bastard fuckin' life in here day after day, surrounded by bastards, a shit-load of'em, and you wouldn't last a minute in here with yer pleases and thank yous, *please* here just gets yer a fuck-off-big scar, like an old skank's pussy; I'd even take one of them right now, your pussy, little lady, you're hot, I bet it smells of everythin' except pussy. Yer'd love a one-on-one with me, eh? Go fuck yourselves, yer don't wanna hear what I was gonna tell you, the fuckin' truth, so yer making me leave, but just so yer know, Juan Oliver's got balls and a cock to go with'em... so fuck you.

'Bring him to me.'

'He's a fuckin' mess; his face is bleeding and he looks ill, the tosser.'

'Then grab him by his hair and drag him, Smacks, this is a riot yer twat, not fuckin' A&E. What do yer wannus to do, get a pissin' wheelchair for him?

'Alright, Badmother.'

'And hurry up, for fuck's sake, we ain't got all day.'

Calm down. Think. That bloke who's just questioned you (Smacks, he said) is an inmate. If he's come into this cell it's because when he came back from the yard he didn't go back to his own, like Armando explained to me: 'They come back in single file from the yard, they each stand in front of their cell, they go into their cells at the same time and when they're all in the

officer in the fish tank closes the doors.' It's obvious. The noise and the alarm, and Germán, Armando and Fermín running off, and Smacks threatening to punch my head in. This is a riot and I'm on my own in here with the mob. He was dressed a bit like me, Smacks, all in grey. Now I understand what Germán was saying about my being mistaken for a Block 5 inmate and ending up in the 'cooler'. There's no need, I'm already cold, freezing, but I can see okay and the dizziness is going. That Smacks is going to come back, I'm sure. If I'm quick I could immobilise him, I'm taller and stronger than he is, but what will I do then if there's loads of them? I should have stayed at home. The twentieth at eight o'clock, the letter said, but I'd have none of it, 'I'm going in on the nineteenth so I can see the prison and meet my workmates,' I told Elena, and she nodded. I wonder what she's doing now. It must be ten o'clock. Will she know what's going on here? I hope not; I'm sure they'll act quickly, get me out of here, and then I'll tell her about it as though it was nothing, over a cup of coffee, and we might even laugh about it. But when Smacks comes back, what am I going to do? I'm a hostage. If they want something they'll use me as currency. The first day, for fuck's sake. 'It's a good opportunity,' my father said. If he'd known what would happen he'd have chained me to the tractor, like when I skived off school to catch frogs. It'd rained and they were croaking in Manuela's pond. Fran and I looked at each other: would it be Miss Úrsula or her sisters the frogs? And with the looks in our faces it was decided. 'So it's frogs instead o' books, is it? Well ye can come with me then, it's going to be neither one nor the other.' The stars weren't even twinkling. I was so scared, there alone, fretting that the Englishman's dogs would smell me. But I didn't call mama. I grabbed hold of my balls and stuck it out and when dad asked me afterwards how my night was I said fine. 'Well there you have it,' he said, 'y'either have both feet planted on the ground for ten hours like last night, or y'only open them to drive the tractor from dawn till the cows come home. It's either the books or the ploughing; I don't want layabouts in me house.' My feet are stuck to the ground now. If only it would open up and swallow me. This would be just the right moment: Smacks is coming back.

'What's yer name?'

'Juan.'

'Juan what?'

'Juan Oliver.'

'What you doin' in 211?'

'They brought me here.'

'You don't fuckin' say. Who brought you here?'

'Those guys in uniform.'

'And the blood?'

'They hit me.'

'Those pussies beat you up?'

'Yep.'

'Why?'

'I told them they stink of shit.'

'Ha ha ha! He told'em they stink of shit. Why've they banged you up?'

'I killed someone.'

'You're innocent, for fuck's sake, every fucking wanker in here's innocent.'

'Not me, I killed that asshole and I'd do it again.'

'Why you dressed different?'

'I put on what they gave me.'

'Drop yer trousers.'

'Why do you want me to do that?'

'Just fuckin' drop'em. When Badmother tells you to do somethin' you shut yer bitch mouth and do it, prick.'

We saw it on the CCTV cameras. Smacks had jostled him out of the cell. He was unsteady but looked better in the face.

'He's taking him to Badmother,' I mumbled.

The chief nodded.

'Shit,' Fermín said.

'Get Valladares here,' the chief ordered. The inmates were bringing their mattresses out of the cells and piling them up in a pyre in the corridor. Badmother, Spike and Studz were standing in a group. Juan was taking two steps zigzag fashion and then a few more quick steps as Smacks shoved him from behind. Badmother watched him arriving with the scar on his neck tenser than ever.

'He's going to carve him up on the spot,' Fermín predicted.

'No he won't. He needs him as a hostage,' I snapped back.

Spike was playing with his ice pick in his hand. We found it on him every week and within twenty-four hours he always had a replacement. He had become Badmother's deputy since Ballerina was transferred following the riot in 98. Juan approached and Badmother spat.

'What's up?'

'We need you.'

Valladares, as you know, is the prison psychologist. Germán says he deserves a medal because he never manages to rehabilitate the inmates but they end up feeling proud of themselves. 'Self-esteem, that's all these bastards needed,' he used to say. Badmother was facing away from the video camera, but Juan's face was clearly visible.

'What's he saying?'

'That his name's Juan Oliver.'

Valladares can read lips. He used to use his skill to pick up girls in nightclubs. 'I like that guy' or 'the white-haired one can father my child any day of the week.' He read the girls' lips and then went straight for them, the dirty dog.

'What else?'

'That he was taken to 211, that the guys in uniforms hit him... wait... yes, because he told them they stank of shit. He says he's in here because he killed someone.'

'Fucking hell! Juan's passing himself off as an inmate!'

'He's not a prisoner?'

'Nope.'

'He's asking why he wants him to take down his trousers.'

Those of us watching held our breath. To you it won't mean anything, but to those of us witnessing all this, it did. The shirt and trousers could be passed off; the garb worn by the inmates of Blocks 4 and 5, the only wings in the prison where uniforms were enforced, was changed once in a while, but Badmother wanted to make sure that he was telling the truth. The underpants with blue elastic the prisoners wore would give him his answer.

I never thought my habit of going commando could save my life. Elena often jokes by saying it means I can be 'Willy the Quick,' but that 'it's not very romantic, Juan; it means I can't take them off you bit by bit, and that's not fair, you're a male chauvinist,' and she would laugh. I've never been able to stand them, not even dad's baggy white ones that mum used to pass on

to me and which slept the sleep of the just in the chest of drawers. It was a good thing I'd got rid of my shoelaces and belt. I hid them in the hole behind the lavatory. Everything's taken off the inmates on their arrival. It wasn't Armando that told me; I'd seen it in the films. No money, no keys, nothing. I threw everything down the toilet and pulled the chain. Smacks must be crap at spot the difference puzzles. He didn't notice the changes between the first and second times he saw me.

'Fuck me, no pants! Look at this one, he's bollock naked,' an amused Badmother shouts.

I can see his fangs and I'm not fainting. But they're frightening, like two daggers.

'Why ain't you wearin' kecks shit head?'

'They told me they'd run out.'

... I din't tell'em shit, Studz, those gel-heads are worse than us and that posh bird was a filthy bitch, all she could do was keep crossin' her legs so you could see her knickers, she was fit yer know, but they wouldn't let me speak; seriously, we ain't worth shit and they ain't interested in our business, they din't wanna know the truth bout Juan and I'd have told'em everythin'; remember? He dropped his trousers, his cock and balls out in the open, the plucky fucker, his bollocks all shrivelled up like chickpeas, the poor little twat was shittin' himself, but some serious balls eh Studz? He din't even flinch when, the sly bastard, he told us that shit bout them running out and I believed him, and you believed him too, shit-head, don't come to me now with that shite bout you not trustin' him, we all fell for it, I wanned to know if he was lyin' to me, cos he was dodging me out, and the fucker's pants would've told us, the blue elastic that we used to make catapults, but they'd run out, the sneaky git, he tricked us all, he weren't wearing shoelaces or a belt and Smacks said he din't find shit on him when he frisked him, he'd killed some bloke, he told us, remember? And he looked so ice cold I was sure he was straight up, I bet it was some bitch, I thought, I told you din't I? It was some bitch, she played away and he topped the bloke, I'd bet a fucking carton of fags it was with a shooter, this one ain't the type to cut some bloke's guts open, with a shooter, bang, in the chest, one, two, three, just cos he's pissed off, I bet that's what happened I told you, the sly fuck, standin' there with his bollocks out, he said to me if you've seen enough of my cock I'll pull my trousers up now, we pissed ourselves, he had some serious balls, Badmother's left a fair few cunts without teeth for less, but I liked Juan, they din't wanna listen cos they wanned to smear him, Studz, but I was gonna tell'em Juan was

legit, not under their piece-a-shit law, but under the real one, the one that makes you a man in the slammer; I'd have told'em but I got put off by that posh cow's snatch and that bloke told me to get out, she had pink knickers, Studz, and a shaved pussy, for fuck's sake, if Smacks had been ten years younger...

Valladares looked at us in astonishment, the chief smiled, Fermín applauded, but I was left thinking, because Badmother's not easy to fool, you see, and those who tried it all needed stitches afterwards. I reacted quickly. I'm not after a medal, you should know, but I've never liked a drama. Everyone else, it seemed, did; the cock-and-bull story amused them, but I was just thinking about the reality. Juan's make-believe had to be backed up by reality, I told myself. 'Fermín, quick, the pants ran out in the storeroom yesterday, get rid of them all, and tell the guardhouse to make a note under inmate arrivals: at eight o'clock in the morning, Juan Oliver Miranda, they can make up the court. Ah! And tell Julián and Alberto to let something drop about the pants and the intake log when the informers turn up so that it reaches Badmother, but without arousing suspicion because Apache plays for both sides, as you know. Fermín looked at the chief, who agreed. I was embarrassed, to be honest, because it should have been him saying it. 'Good work, Armando, Juan's got an alibi now,' he admitted, and if you want me to be frank, I felt proud, especially in front of José Utrilla, because it should have been me in charge. They bypassed me when it came to it: Utrilla had friends in the right places. But I don't want to speak badly of him, I'm sorry.

'And now what shall we do, Badmother? The pigs will get here soon and they're gonna beat the shit out of us.'

'Now we're gonna fuck'em good and proper, Spike.'

'So what then? Burn the mattresses?'

'Nope.'

'What yer think Juan?'

'No idea, Badmother, I don't know what the deal is.'

'The deal is a riot, you twat, the deal's to fuck all these bastards in the arse, get decent food for us plebs and not the shit they give us, more time in the yard and a telly in our kennels,

and get'em to ditch that law on dangerous cons, cos they're already treatin' us like rats, geddit? That's our deal and either you're with us or you won't even need yer trousers to hold yer bollocks up, goddit?'

'If we'd nabbed Old Wench, Greybeard or The Bull we'd have had hostages, Badmother, but they got away.'

'Yeah, Studz, that wudna been bad.'

'Without hostages the pigs are gonna kick the fuck out of us.'

'And who said we din't have hostages, Smacks?'

'These turds? Those tossers couldn't give a shit if we cut every prisoner's throat, Badmother.'

'I wasn't talkin' bout them, shit-for-brains.'

'So who are the hostages then?'

'There's one or two even better than Armando, Germán or Fermín.'

And Badmother looked at Juan.

III

'I'm Gerardo Niebla, Special Ops captain. We're taking control of the situation from now on.'

The command centre, as per procedure for this kind of event, was set up in a meeting room next-door to the chief's office. It was the chief himself who asked me to join them: 'you too, Armando', because what I lack in rank, you should know, I more than make up for with my knowledge of the prison. There weren't many of us there. A Penal Institutions representative who had just arrived from the Ministry laden with plans, the chief, José Utrilla, me, and the guy that had just appeared at the door dressed like Robocop: 'I'm Gerardo Niebla,' he said, with a voice that immediately evoked the Apocalypse. There were also communications specialists to connect monitors to the CCTV, install half a dozen telephones and set up PCs with access to the Ministry of Justice and Home Office databases, and a large white panel on which the Special Ops guy, after we outlined the situation for him, wrote 'Operation Badmother' in elaborate handwriting, practically like a medieval monk's. 'Now we've got a little name,' I thought, 'that's all we need, to make him more famous than he already is.'

'Has Juan Oliver got any family?'

We all looked at each other. I had a vague memory of Juan mentioning his wife in the guardroom: 'she's three months gone,' he'd said. José Utrilla confessed that he couldn't remember what marital status appeared in his file and we went to look for it.

'It's better we keep it quiet. To all intents and purposes he's a prisoner. We'd be signing his death warrant if anyone on the outside found out he was an officer and leaked it to the press.'

The Special Ops captain knew what I was talking about. Utrilla returned with the file.

'Married to Elena Vázquez Guardiola. No children. Born in Unquera, Santander province. He didn't provide a mobile number. We should call just in case. Did he tell you where he lived here Armando?'

There hadn't been time. Nobody had had time for anything that morning, you understand?

He's swallowed it. I get the feeling he's going to see me as one of his own. I felt it even when he looked at me fiercely as he mentioned the hostages. But why did he do that? He was

trying to shit me up, but I held his gaze. 'Look him in the eyes, Juan, in the eyes,' I told myself. If you look these blokes in the eyes they won't suspect. No looking away. Those green eyes Badmother looks at you with are pure ice. They're like Elena's but with none of her softness. I fell in love with those eyes the moment I saw them. 'Are you from round here?' I asked. And she burst out laughing. I was so embarrassed. Everyone at the bar in the nightclub was looking at me. And she kept laughing. What a prat. I didn't know what she was laughing about until I saw what she had on her t-shirt. 'I Love Laredo.' What an idiot, she had it on her t-shirt and there was me asking her if she was local. 'Yeah, yeah, I'm from round here, how did you figure it out?' And she laughed her head off and I stood there red as a beetroot. 'Go on then, buy me a drink.' And I bought her one, of course, and that night I was lost in those eyes, a green sea of hope. Would they have told her what's going on here yet? Shit, I hope she doesn't panic. 'Juan, when you get back we'll have a cake to celebrate baby's monthiversary, it's been three months already, Juan,' and I stroked her belly, still flat. She's going to have a rough time on her own. Armando will look after her, I'm sure, he'll take her home to his wife. Well, I don't know, he didn't say whether he was married. I bet he is; he's a good man, Armando. And good men have good women by their side. Badmother's gesturing to me, what will he want now? The slash to his throat must have had him knocking on death's door. The scar's long and the wound must have been deep. Best I go over. If I could get to the security zone I might be able to figure out an escape plan, but I don't know how. 'If there's a riot we isolate the blocks,' Armando told me. Isolated.

'What do you want, Badmother?'

'Come with me; and you, Studz, go to the security zone and tell them we want mobiles so we can speak to them. Back in a minute.'

'Where are we going?'

'Shut up and come with me, Bigballs.'

'My name's Juan.'

'No one's called Juan in the slammer, you can be Bigballs.'

'How about Long Johns, Badmother?'

'Yeah, that's it Spike, we'll call the bastard Long Johns. Come on then, Long Johns, come with me; we gotta get to work.'

... I knew it, Studz, I knew we were gonna stir up some shit, I told you, we could do better than Old Wench and Greybeard, much better, eh Studz? I'd love to have seen the face of that prick in charge of the pigs, I bet he thought it'd last two minutes, wham bam, a few smoke bombs, a couple of thumps on the head and off to the cooler I bet they said, but we fucked'em good and proper, old Mopchopper in the barber's gave me the idea, Studz, they live like fuckin' kings, Badmother, he said, the fuckin' bastards, I said, cos in the nick there's always been classes, premiership and non-league, as Ballerina used to say, just like on the outside, for fuck's sake, my mother was a non-leaguer, she shagged the manager at the bank where she used to clean; that bloke was still second division, but he wudda gone premier league, Studz, if I hadn't stuck a blade in his ribs that day, yer piece of shit, yer killed me, he said with his eyes poppin' out his head, have summa that, yer prick, gimme the money, and that's for bangin' my mother; the slut, Studz, for two dresses and a bracelet, us with nothin' to eat, for fuck's sake, and for two dresses she spreads her legs; she'd been spreadin'em that day and I told the tosser to gimme the money or he wouldn't be needin' it no more, this ain't what it looks like, what a dickhead, what did I care if he was fuckin' my ma, half the neighbourhood was bangin' her, Studz, even your cousin shagged her, gimme the money, pussy, and fuck her all you like, I said, I told you bout it, din't I? Same shit, the Old Bill are premiership and we're non-league and we hammered'em, with no hostages they wudna held off for a minute, who the fuck did they think we were I shudda said to those bastards in ties, no hostages; how the fuck were we sposed to do a riot without hostages? Not even Smacks would think about putting on a riot without hostages, Smacks booted the bank manager in the mouth when he said somethin' like ow, ow, my children! So you stop sayin' ow, with metal fuckin' toe caps right in the mouth, Studz, knocked all his teeth out, no shit, what did he need'em for if he was already cut open and his cash blagged; well cos he was fuckin' my mother, the fuckin' cunt, I told the cops when they nicked me, and I wanned him to pay for his shaggin', the tosser, what the fuck, I'm like the pimp, if you wanna fuck you pay and if you ain't got any cash then the bank pays, for fuck's sake, cos he fucked her at the bank, no shit, on the assistant manager's desk, cos the fucker din't wanna get his own desk dirty, so anyway the Old Bill thought it'd turn out sweet for'em, a few smoke bombs and we'd all bend over, what the fuck, they din't know Badmother, come on then, come get us and we'll play football with the hostages' heads and tomorrow they'll play with yours as payback, arseholes, I shouted, remember Studz? Shat'em right up, and it went out on the telly,

fuckin' top-notch, Smacks told me, but the hostages thing was the bollocks and I thought of it myself, it was in the barber's, yes mate, old Mopchopper gave me the idea...

The CCTV cameras meant we could monitor the rioters exhaustively. The room we were in was full of police officers watching monitors, talking on the telephone, looking things up on the computers, with Gerardo Niebla giving orders. The riot police surrounded the prison, blue alert, Niebla had said, asking José Utrilla and me to leave the room, but not the prison. 'Please remain reachable, in the security zone, we'll need your help.' We were unable to locate Juan's wife until well into the afternoon. The Santander number was no longer in use. The Civil Guard found Juan's father in the village where he lived, but he didn't know the address nor whether he had a telephone in Seville; he hadn't yet been told. Elena's mother, who lived in Laredo, knew about as much. They wanted to know what was going on, but we told the Civil Guard not to say anything, just that he had to report to us in two days' time and we wanted to notify him. We told them to go and get Elena. 'If you don't mind, Armando, you attend to her; I don't like giving people bad news and I didn't even meet the lad,' José Utrilla pleaded with me. She was a stunning girl. Tall, blonde, with fabulous green eyes and an extraordinary softness to her face. 'What's happened to Juan, for God's sake?' 'Don't worry,' I told her, 'nothing serious. There's nothing to worry about any more.' She was crying. 'I need to speak to him,' she demanded anxiously, and I took her hand, 'I'm afraid that's not possible, love, it would be too dangerous for him, and you wouldn't want to put him in a tight spot, would you? As far as they know Juan's one of them now, he's not in danger. If the negotiations fail, Special Ops will get him out of there no problem; they're a cold-blooded lot, but they've got no weapons. Don't worry, we know what we're doing.' A social worker took her away. The Ministry of Justice had called: 'A member of staff is on her way, she'll pick up the wife and take her to a hotel. She'll stay with her until it's all over.' 'So she doesn't talk to the press or anyone else,' Gerardo Niebla said later on, when he asked us to explain to him the plans for Blocks 4 and 5.

'Why can't we see what's going on in Block 4?'

'The system went down three days ago. We reported it but they said there were no replacements.'

'Shit. We need to get cameras in there, and microphones. Can we get in through the air-conditioning?'

'Presumably, you'll have to see.'

'What prisoners are in there?'

'Criminals that aren't particularly dangerous, the ones that don't get in the newspapers.

The big fish are in 3.

Everyone greets Badmother with respect. With fear. 'Come with me, Long Johns, let's get to work,' he says to me. Spike's following behind. I don't trust him. He plays with his stiletto like it was an extension of his hand. How much flesh has this bloke sliced up? With just a gesture or a word, an 'oi!', Badmother makes people respect him as we walk. We've left the corridor and service area behind and we can see the yard, now empty, through the window, with police on the roofs taking aim with their automatic weapons. 'Spike, we need hoods, so those bastards on the roofs can't identify us, take care of it.' At the boundary with Block 4 there are several well-built men with metal bars. 'No one's left their cells, Badmother, by order of Badmother, we told them, till you tell us what to do,' says one with a dragon tattooed on his arm. He dismisses him with a wave of his hand, a 'wait' that seems to blow air into the guy who's now looking me up and down as he scratches his hairy chest with his metal bar. 'Who's with them, Spike?' Badmother asks, turning round. 'Fluff and his lot, they're watching them.' 'Watching who?' I asked, and he bellowed with laughter, punching his thighs. 'You ain't got a clue have you Long Johns?' The Block 4 gallery was nothing like the one we'd just left behind where there was mayhem. Here the silence was overwhelming; a soft, cowardly silence which Badmother's voice seemed to pierce as if it was made of butter.

'How are they, Fluff?'

'How do you think, Badmother, they're shitting it.'

'How many are there?'

'Three.'

'What you told them?'

'To wait for the authority to arrive, like it's a Tejero coup.'

'I'm not Tejero, you fucking bastard, don't even fucking compare me to the pissing Civil Guard. Long Johns, you wanted to know who the hostages were?'

'Who are they?'

'You'll see. Open the door, Fluff.'

They came out of Block 5 and headed towards 4. We lost their trail as they went in. 'I don't know what Badmother's up to, Fermín, but I don't like it one bit.' Elena had been taken away by the social worker. In the infirmary they gave her a box of sedatives. 'Two pills every eight hours,' the doctor prescribed. She went away in tears. She couldn't understand why we'd left him there in the cell. I explained it all to her: 'There was nothing we could do, he couldn't move, Elena, please try to understand, they would have got all of us.' And she was furious, practically hysterical: 'And you call yourselves colleagues?! You're just a bunch of cowards! He wouldn't have let you down, Juan's not like that, he's never left anyone behind.' No, Elena, one thing we're not is suicidal, I was going to say, but I kept quiet; sometimes it's better to say nothing, don't you think? Because reasons are meaningless when you fear for a loved one. News of the riot had reached the radio stations. Germán informed us: 'There's already journalists and photographers outside, and one or two television cameras.' 'The families will be here in no time,' I thought, which is why the riot police had cordoned off the area and were letting nobody through. There was a lot of activity where we were. Special Ops coming and going in a hurry, armed to the teeth. 'This won't take long to go off,' I was sure; you would have interpreted it in the same way, because they seemed tense, you know?

'Without hostages they've had it, Fermín.'

'I'm surprised Badmother hasn't got any hostages, boss.'

'That's what baffles me. But there's no one important in Block 4.'

'No, there is in 3 but not 4. By the way, have they started the work on Block 3?'

'What work, Fermín?'

'Remember? They were going to strengthen security in four of the cells.'

'And where were they going to move the inmates from those cells?'

'I don't know.'

'Ask.'

He asked and, what can I say, I would rather not have heard the answer. The work was supposed to begin that day. It had to be put on hold, of course, but the night before six prisoners had already been moved. To Block 4. You already know who three of them were. Badmother did have hostages and Ministry didn't like it one bit when they found out who they

were. The minister even called the chief and asked him how it could have happened. 'It' was a headline on all the radio and television news programmes going out that night.

... Can yer believe it, Studz, what the youngest kid said to me, the prick, careful what yer do cos we know where yer family is, did they fuck, don't even know myself, Patri went off with a Portuguese gypsy, the slag, Studz, and she took the kids with her, ain't seen'em in five years, if I catch her I'll cut her up, startin' with her snatch, I swear on my own bollocks, no kids, five years, and the little shit knew where my family lived; stick yer tongue in yer arse, cunt, I told him, remember? I might do it myself and sew yer fuckin' mouth up with wire, yer chicken bastard, cos you never had balls, hands in the air when the Old Bill found ya, I know all bout that, I never put my hands up, would I fuck, my shooter stays in my hand and if they wanna arrest me they can come get me, for fuck's sake, cos they either catch Badmother by surprise, like they did, Studz, or he'll die with his balls firmly in place, not like you, pussy, cos you're a pussy, I told him, and you're gonna shit yourself even more when I introduce yer to Smacks, meet my friend, Smacks, look after him, I said, don't laugh, Studz, I know what yer thinkin', Smacks said it himself dinne, look, boy, I don't need weapons, I kill with my cock, mate, with the meat between my legs, ha ha ha, Studz, fuckin' priceless, and the bloke with his arse against the wall and Juan's face, did you see Juan's face? What yer think, Long Johns, what yer reckon, I said, and Juan said full on Badmother, full on, they ain't gonna like this at all outside, too fuckin' right they won't like it, the bastards, how the fuck was I sposed to do a riot with no hostages, and they had to be ones that would sting'em where it hurts, I read it once in the paper, their terms to stop their hunger strike were accepted, for fuck's sake, I said it to old Mopchopper, Studz, if we went on hunger strike they'd just let us die, fuckin' bastards, we're worse than rats to them, but these blokes get whatever they want, well we're gonna make yer life a fuckin' misery, stop eatin' if yer want, less work for the gravediggers, I told him, the little shit, cos there's no pig law in here, twat, just Badmother's law, and you can stick yer tongue in yer arse and stop givin' me that shit bout my family, okay mate? Five years without seein' my kids, Studz, I'll cut Patri up the moment I see her, and the Portuguese gypsy, my friend said he was, the cunt, he's shaggin' her right now I bet, Patri was fit eh, Studz? What a pair of tits and what a good fuck she was, fuck it...

The three of them are sitting on the bed. Fluff is making sure they stay still, 'no moving about.' The youngest one's really tense. He reminds me of my brother Miguel. Like him he doesn't look much, but he has pride and he doesn't let himself be subjugated. Papa wanted to bring him into line and he was never able to. Until finally he left. Almost two years ago now. 'Hey, Juan, it's Miguel. I'm fine. I'm in Argentina,' he told me on the telephone that day, a couple of months after leaving, a week before his birthday. Twenty-one he was going to be. This boy reminds me of Miguel. The others look calmer but, sitting on the edge of the mattress, this one has an intense look about him, hardly able to contain himself. 'Stick your tongue in your arse, you piece of shit,' Badmother says to him, among plenty of other things, and I can see how his muscles are tensing up and he's whispering something I can't understand. Only his friends understand him. A grimace verging on a smile appears on the lips of one of them, the tallest and stockiest. He's wearing an earring, like Badmother. There's seven of us in the cell and the air's becoming unbreathable. I don't know yet why these guys are important to Badmother. They look like garage robbers, at the most a knife to the throat of their victim, nothing that would hold back the police. They don't look like much at all. 'We're gonna win time with you tossers, you know? We won't do nothing to you unless you make us, but you're our prisoners; in other words you're sentenced twice, got it? Do what I say, shut your mouths and don't come to me with that shit about human rights because in the slammer there's no rights and we ain't human, we're all just scum.' They listen impassively to Badmother's speech. Only the blonde one, who's stood up now, dares to speak. 'We want you to guarant...' He doesn't have time to finish. Spike grabs his shoulder and makes him sit down. 'Only when spoken to, prick. Otherwise, like Badmother said, keep your mouth shut.' They come with us, by order of Badmother. He doesn't like the idea of keeping them at the end of Block 4, 'it's too near 3,' he says. 'You take care of them Long Johns, they're your responsibility.' Thinking I'm too thin-skinned, he appoints Smacks as deputy. I try to get out of it but he doesn't allow it. All he had to do was look at me to make it clear he won't be contradicted. If Elena could see me (she must know by now), she'd be amazed. I came in an officer, then I became an inmate and now I'm the right-hand man of the meanest bastard in the prison. 'You're a leader,' Elena often says, flattering me, 'it's just that you've always preferred to obey, but one day you'll give the orders.' Such is life. Now I'm going to be in charge, but in the world's sewer, a kind of rat boss. I'd like to be with her now, on the sofa, watching some film and stroking her tummy. 'It's kicking,' I'd say. 'You wally, it won't kick yet, it must be my belly,' and her laughter would fill the room and like we almost always do we'd end

up making love, right there on the rug we brought from home, the one next to the fireplace, both of us burning down below.

'Who are these guys, Badmother?'

'You ain't guessed yet, Long Johns?'

'They just look like jail fodder, like me, nothing important.'

'That sure as shit ain't what they'll think on the outside.'

'So what's so fucking special about them?'

Badmother gets the blonde one to take off his t-shirt. On his shoulder, a hard, wide shoulder, the tattoo seems to come to life as his muscles tense up.

'What you think, Long Johns?'

'Bloody hell, Badmother. Full on. They won't like this on the outside at all.'

'Too fucking right pal; as I said, better than Armando, Old Wench or The Bull.'

'So now what?'

'We're gonna show the pigs our hand.'

'We've only got three of a kind, are we gonna play them face up?'

'We're betting big because we're gonna fucking win, Long Johns; I can see you never played prison poker, no one bluffs in here unless they seen the other one's cards, and I already clocked theirs and they ain't got shit, all they got is fear from now on, don't you reckon Long Johns?'

Fluff opens the door and tells them to get out. When he reaches me, the blonde one tilts his tattooed shoulder towards my face and very quietly says: 'Mind its poison.' I better do. I don't like snakes.

IV

'Mikel Belasategui, alias Hernani, forty-one years old, born in Hernani. Serving thirty years in prison for the murder on 13 January 1996 of High Court Judge Félix Montero Levián. He was the leader of the Donosti cell, dismantled by the police in October 1997.'

'Txema Ibarondo, alias Blondie, twenty-five years old, born in Beasaín. Sentenced in spring 1993 to a hundred and twelve years in prison after being found guilty of killing three Civil Guard officers in Biescas, Huesca province, in 1991. The bomb that blew up the Land Rover also injured four civilians, two of whom are wheelchair-bound as a result.'

'Patxi Iragui, alias Musus, nineteen years old, sentenced on April 22 to eight years in prison after being identified as the person who threw a petrol bomb that caused burns to forty percent of the body of Basque police officer Andoni Lacruz Mengíbar during the acts of vandalism taking place in Zarautz's festival week in 2000.'

'These are the identities of the three Basque prisoners belonging to the terrorist group ETA who have been taken hostage by ordinary inmates at the Seville 2 penal institution, Ministry of Justice sources have confirmed to Telecinco. The prison has been cordoned off by riot police and the prisoners' demands are not yet known.'

Someone from the ministry must have leaked the news to the press. You can be sure it wasn't anyone from the prison, because all communications were intercepted by the police. It was just an hour after Badmother, accompanied by Smacks, Studz and Juan, marched triumphantly into Block 5, cheered by the rest of the prisoners. We saw them on the CCTV. The three Basques walked in front of them, their hands tied up with strips of sheet. Smacks shoved them into the centre of the corridor, facing the cameras. The hostages kept their composure, unlike the onlookers, who jumped up and down and made signs with their hands on their private parts and other obscene gestures. Badmother came forward. With a theatrical flourish he counted the hostages, you can just imagine, one..., two..., three, taking his time, enjoying himself. 'Well he *is* a man of letters,' joked Germán. He ended his performance by running his index finger across his throat, and that needs no translation, I'm sure you'll agree. Now we knew that Badmother had an ace up his sleeve. 'Three aces,' Fermín pointed out. 'Yep, three. I'd like to see Robocop's face

now, I'd give a month's pay,' I muttered, because that fool thought it would be over in two shakes, but I suspected, because I know him well after all these years, that Badmother wasn't going to embark on this escapade without having the enemy by the balls, if you'll excuse the expression. It wasn't hurting me particularly, but you can bet that someone up there on high was screwing up his face in pain at that moment.

... they din't take a blind bloody bit of notice, Studz, till then, and in five minutes we had two mobiles to talk to Niebla with, they could stick'em up their arses, I said, remember? We din't answer, I'll-de-cide-when-to-speak-to-you-mo-ther-fuck-er, I shouted, openin' my mouth wide, Studz, to show'em my teeth, there in front of the camera, like a fuckin' TV presenter, and Niebla called, remember? And we put salsa music on the phones and everyone danced, Smacks showin'em his arse, shakin' it like a Cuban mulatta, Smacks has still got a nice arse ain't he, Studz? Shame it's gone rotten, otherwise he'd have goddit good and proper that day I met that posh bitch, what a pussy she had, Studz, but we had to use our heads, I told you all, if they wanna talk, then we don't, first things first, eh? So Long Johns is in charge of those pricks, and Smacks pulled a long face and I said don't think yer tosser, Long Johns does the thinking, he thinks and you kick the shit out these twats if they get cocky or if the pigs come in, but the first thing, Studz, is to think, cos otherwise it'll be a smoke bomb or two and we're all fucked, so we put'em in a cell, makin' sure they see which one on the telly, and if there's any smoke bombs we'll cut their throats like chickens, we'll block out the cameras and move'em to a different cell, but always with two inside with blades and three outside, let's see if they got the balls, I said to ya, eh? And Smacks whispered in my ear, but Badmother, this Juan's a new fish, for fuck's sake, what if he's a rat? And I said no mate, Long Johns is solid, he topped someone for shaggin' his wife, I bet, I asked him, remember? But that was after, first we had to shit on the Old Bill, not talk to'em, pull one on the fleecin' cunts at the top, and fuck me did we have hostages, you ever seen a riot with no hostages Studz? We had three, top boys, the ones that blast you with bombs and put bullets in yer head, the arseholes, the ones with human fuckin' rights, and us without shit, no rights what so fucking ever, for fuck's sake, Studz, they kill'em and they give'em rights, well come on then, let's see what you do now so yer shit don't hit the fan tomorrow, I told'em, remember? Facin' the camera like an actor, if-you-e-ven-think-a-bout-com-ing-in-you'll-have-no-ETA-boys-no-fuck-ing-noth-ing, and me pissin' myself, Studz, just picturin' the Old Bills' faces,

pronouncin' my words proper and them hangin' on every one of'em, like an actor, mate, Smacks told me after when it was all over...

Smacks glances at me out of the corner of his eye, but this one's got no daggers at all in his look. 'At your orders, then,' he says sarkily. 'Put them in 191, stay with them, take someone with you, I'll stay outside. You heard Badmother, two inside with blades and three outside.' How he loves having to obey me, but if I mention Badmother his smile freezes over. Studz has told me that if I fuck up he'll cut my balls off, and I know he'd do it. I know because of what Badmother told me on the way to Block 4: 'He took out three neighbours, Long Johns, three; they'd smacked his girl about because he scratched their new car and he picked up his rabbit gun and killed all three of them, the dad at the door, the mum in the kitchen and the kid while it watched Bugs Bunny, would you believe the coincidence, a rabbit, he topped the three of them, for smacking his little girl about.' The blonde one, Txema, hasn't been able to show me the classic ETA tattoo of a snake wrapped around an axe again. I moved to his left and on his left shoulder all he's got is a vaccine scar. Shame it wasn't an inoculation against evil. He wouldn't be here. And nor would I. There would be no prisons. 'I don't know why there are so many bad people,' Elena once said as she read the newspaper. My eyes were on her cleavage; Elena's got lovely breasts. Little round ones, the kind that fit in your hand, just as I like them. She must be crying and crying, I hope it doesn't affect the little one, if something happened to the baby I'd be capable of killing Badmother and Badmother's father too, if he even knows him, which I doubt. 'Why are there so many bad people?' she asked me, and I tilted her face up with my hand on her chin and kissed her on the lips. 'You kiss like an angel,' I teased, and she grabbed my hand and slid it down her top. Her tits are firm and hard. And here's me remembering Elena's breasts, getting stiff just thinking about it, with everything that's going on around me. 'So Smacks, don't even touch the hostages, okay? Only if the cops come in and when I tell you to, because if there's any fuck ups it'll be me answering to Badmother.' He doesn't respond. But he can sense I'm a tough nut to crack. I'm here because I killed a guy, I told them. He's here because he killed two. He's not very bright, but he knows that if you can kill one person you can kill two hundred.

'It's all gonna kick off now.'

'Do you think the police will come in?'

'Look, I don't give a shit if they do, Long Johns, I've spent eighteen years of my forty-one-year fucking life in jail and I got plenty more to serve, all I want is more time in the yard, better grub, a bird with her legs open every couple of weeks and a telly in my cell, and if I can't have that then they can come and fuck us in the arse, because is it really worth living worse than animals?'

'Life's always worth living, Badmother.'

'So that's why you ended one then is it? Bah, just get on with your shit and put one of those piece-of-crap hoods they made for us on, I don't want the pussycats on the roofs clocking us.'

We saw who the hostages were and Special Ops stopped their toing and froing in the security zone corridors. The chief came by, his face pale. 'Everything's on hold, Ministry's orders, we've got to negotiate.' He looked at us as though he wanted answers. We didn't have any, no one did.

'Utrilla, who signed the order to transfer the ETA lot to Block 4?'

'You did, chief.'

'I don't remember that, Utrilla.'

'Ask your secretary; if you want I can go and find the papers, I've got them in my office.'

'Don't bother. I sign so many bloody papers every day.'

'Problems, boss?'

'The undersecretary's called me now, Armando. Asking me how it could have happened.'

'And what did you say, Don Ramón?'

'That it's happened, for fuck's sake, what else could I say? After this I'll be running the jail at the legion barracks in Melilla.'

'It won't come to that, don't worry.'

'Do you think Badmother will kill them if Special Ops try to go in?'

'We better just hope they don't go in, boss.'

He told us that Gerardo Niebla hadn't moved a muscle as he watched the scene of Badmother arriving in Block 5 with the hostages. He took notes and murmured a 'bastard' as Badmother approached the camera to shout that he would talk to them when it suited him. He asked for a plan of the wing after seeing which cell Juan and Smacks were putting the Basques in

and in hushed tones he and his assistant discussed an outline of the strategy to follow if an assault became necessary. 'We're staying put; the minister wants to coordinate the operation in person,' he finally said and, according to the chief, he gave him a nasty look, like the one he gave him when they blocked out the security cameras and the monitors went blank. Just one camera, hidden among the fluorescent tubes, transmitted images and, through its fisheye lens, it relayed to us a futuristic scene in which everything looked deformed. There was no need for them to have put hoods on, nobody was able to identify any of them in those images. The queen ant had disappeared from the ants' nest and now they all looked like worker ants. We had one Badmother, I thought to myself, and now we've got three hundred.

... And I was keepin' things in order, Shitstabber, you take Smacks' blade, go in and tell him to guard the door, go on, and you Long Johns come and have lunch with me; you were with us, remember Studz? I dunno why but I reckoned Juan was straight up, how he screwed us the sly fucker, and there's me askin' his advice, would yer believe it? I was askin' one of *them* for advice, but he seemed to have brains; so then, Long Johns, how would you do this shit, I asked him, I saw you were a bit sketched out, Studz, but I thought you was just jealous, like Patri that day she caught me bangin' Manuela in her bed, pig, son of a bitch, she said, and she started smackin' me, you dunno how Patri dealt'em, Studz, with closed fists, and it made me laugh, it was just a shag, woman, fuck's sake, and she kept hittin' me, till I got fucked off with it, fuckin' come here, and you know what, Studz, cos you only done it payin' yer tosser, but I did it with my skills, I banged Patri and Manuela right there, and what're yer like, Vicente, Manuela said, and she called Patri a whore, but she stroked her tits; so anyway, you looked jealous, like Patri, but you were just dodged out, I know that now, no need to say it, Juan had brains, we gotta negotiate, Badmother, don't give'em a reason to attack, cos with these hostages they won't wanna do it, negotiate, make them at the top squirm and get it all out in the papers, no violence, cos it ain't those boys' fault, their problem ain't with us, it's with society, what a way with words Juan had, eh Studz! You can't deny it, the clever bastard had the gift of the gab, even you said it, that when it's all over what can't happen is for shit to get worse for us, he reasoned, I told Smacks, for fuck's sake, he thinks and you give out beatin's, it seemed like a good idea and you thought so too, Studz, a committee, three blokes, and they could send whoever they wanted, always on our terrain, he said, but guaranteein' them immunity; I din't know what that meant,

but he explained it, that we don't beat the shit out of'em and they get to go back to the security zone whether there's an agreement or not, essential he said it was, and I said alright, remember? Me, you and the Poet, that was the committee, cos the Poet can talk too, you two talk and I'll fire an *I'm gonna cut you all up pricks* at'em, just to shit'em up in case they chicken out, that's what we'll do, come on then, we'll tell'em on the mobile, Long Johns, and he said no, no callin'em, they'll call us, gimme a mobile the crafty fucker said to me, he din't know shit, Studz, so I gave him it, the thing is I trusted that fuckin' asshole, I liked him and he did one on me, not many people've shafted me in my life, Studz, but Juan had brains...

He's given me a mobile. I've got to figure out how I can use it. The two phones are connected, whatever I say will be heard by Badmother. I want to ask after Elena. An Indian looking bloke, by the name of Apache, Badmother tells me, has whispered something in his ear. Badmother looks at me and smiles. We eat the food passed to us from the security zone by a chap in a t-shirt and pants. 'No uniforms,' Badmother had ordered. I've won his trust now, but Studz is suspicious and Smacks even more so. I've told him we've got to negotiate, not to use violence, be good boys. Saying that to this mob is like throwing sugar on an orange and hoping it will turn into marmalade, but he seems to be swallowing it; he looks to me because he wants some good sense around him. My mother trusted me too. 'Please talk to your brother, Juan, tell him how it is.' And I would say to him: 'Miguel, why don't you sort yourself out, mate. If you don't want to study, then work, and if you don't want to work on the farm, then do whatever, but don't hang around giving mum and dad shit all day long,' and Miguel would pass me a piece of chocolate and tell me to stop preaching, that our folks were being unbearable and he just wanted to be free. Miguel doesn't know what freedom is; well, he does now, in Argentina he said he was, but not the freedom you don't appreciate when you're out on the street. This is tough, it must be really tough, no matter how bad you are, even for Badmother or Smacks: always the same people, always keeping your eye on the concealed hand of whoever passes you by. Badmother doesn't want to talk strategy anymore, he wants to know why I'm in here, 'Some bloke shagged your girl and you killed the bastard, didn't you Long Johns?' I've denied it, saying that I wouldn't kill anyone for that. I haven't thought up a story, so I'll make it up as I go. A guy that sold drugs, a brother hooked on heroine, a wrap that was cut with something and almost topped him, and a few stabs to the dealer's gut. 'That's what happened, Badmother, no one

shagged my girl.' I've surprised him; he'd told himself a story and he didn't like mine, but he nods. He calls me by my real name. 'I used to sell shit too, Juan, but without cutting it, alright! The good stuff. But it was because I didn't have a penny and I had three kids to feed, got it? Nobody died from my shit, I swear, it was good quality.' I'm surprised he's explaining himself. I wouldn't have imagined Badmother making excuses. There's something in him that touches you, a childlike personality residing under the impenetrable crust that life has formed around him. Not like Studz. Studz just looks at me and cleans his finger nails with his blade, Studz is just crust. Nobody kills three people for giving his daughter a few slaps, only an animal does that.

'Got a wife Juan?'

'Yeah, Badmother, her name's Elena.'

'Where is she?'

'She came with me to Seville. She must be worried what with the news on the television.'

'Then call her, for fuck's sake.'

'We haven't got a telephone yet; she was gonna buy a mobile.'

'Go on, just speak to those fuckers and get them to put you in touch with her, and tell her, what's her name, ah yeah, Elena, tell Elena to find a nice little pussy for me.'

They've told me that just by pressing OK the phone will dial through to the people in charge of the negotiations. Gerardo Niebla comes on the line. 'It's Juan Oliver, who are you? Niebla? The boss? I've got nothing to say to you right now,' I tell him, 'put that dickhead Armando on.' The copper persists, he wants us to tell him our demands and in code he tries to get me to reveal how many men are guarding the Basques. Badmother's listening. 'Oi, pig, give the phone to Greybeard and go fuck yourself,' Badmother hurls at him. Armando comes on the phone. 'Look, you fucking bastard, before this is over I'm gonna give you back that punch in the face, but right now I wanna talk to my wife, so find her.' 'We'll try,' he answers. He must be smiling. He's got a nice smile, Armando. 'Don't try, Greybeard you cock, just do it, and tell that Niebla twat this is our first condition, that until Long Johns has spoken to his bird we ain't doing shit, got it mate?'

'Thanks, Badmother.'

'No problem, Juan. I ain't got no one waiting for me outside, have I, no one.'

I couldn't tell him. I knew Badmother was listening in on the conversation and if I'd told him, you must understand, it would have been like throwing him in a ditch and shovelling the first spadeful of earth on him. The call had been put through to me an hour earlier by the switchboard. 'Don Armando, Señorita Blanca Artigas is asking for you.' It didn't drop until I went on the phone; then I knew who it was about before she was even mentioned. It couldn't have been anyone else. 'Elena's escaped from the hotel we were at, I don't know where she's gone.' But I couldn't tell Juan.

V

The air-conditioning ducts are too narrow for a person to fit through them. The designers were thinking less about someone from outside wanting to get in and more about stopping some clever clogs inside from using them to get some air, if you see what I mean. 'A remote-controlled vehicle won't work either,' the chief said Niebla had confessed to him, because there were little bumps at the joints between each section. And with no cameras or microphones it was like leaving Special Ops blind and deaf, he stressed. I looked at Fermín. It was a look that said something: 'All this James Bond technology and now they can't even get over a bump.' We were all surprised by a booming voice that exclaimed: 'The Martian transporter!'

'What the hell are you on about, Fermín?'

'This year my boy's grandparents gave him a Martian transporter.'

'So what?'

'Well this transporter thing has four-wheel drive and all four wheels lift up separately and have claw type things on them. It'll clear a bump like a grasshopper jumps an ant; it can go over a bloody banana, I've seen little Ángel do it with my own eyes!'

A little over an hour later, after the technicians fitted the transporter with a receiver that had a more powerful signal, the first images and sound from Block 5 started to come through. It was confirmed to us by the chief, who had gone back to the command post after accompanying Fermín. 'When I tell my boy he ain't gonna to believe it,' Fermín said cheerfully. There was a certain euphoria in the security zone. 'Now they don't know we can see them and hear them. Niebla says it would be better if they blocked off the cameras, it would make them feel safe and confident,' the chief told us. Badmother hadn't decided to move the ETA men to another cell yet. Shitstabber and two others were still on the door of 191, guarding the entrance. 'Everything in order?' they'd heard Studz ask, and the inmates on the door assented. According to the chief it was comical; they practically stood to attention in front of Studz.

... By the time they could see us we'd already pulled the stunt, Studz, remember? I told Long Johns, now we're gonna pull one on the pigs, Long Johns, put those twats each in their own cell, two blokes tooled up in each with no one on the door, and three blokes at 191, eh Long

Johns! Like the Bank of fuckin' Spain's gold was in there, no shit, Long Johns, Patri used to tell me my cock was a treasure, that I shudda been a gigolo cos I'd have made millions, can yer imagine it? What a laugh, shaggin' birds all day long and gettin' paid for it, twenty thousand pesetas a pop, mate, and I can do four in one go, eh, you're gonna make me sore, Patri'd say to me, stop will you, keep goin' or I'll smack yer I'd say, Patri was fit; so there were three blokes guardin' the door, like there was treasure in there but there was nothin', we took grub in and everythin', stuck it under the mattresses, to piss the Old Bill off if they decide to come in, cos if they do they won't find shit, just air, and their throats'll be cut in the other cells, it's well thought out ain't it, Long Johns, I said, and he said yeah, that he wudna thought of it, Studz, the thing is he was worried bout his bird, he told me, dinne, and what bout if we get'em to bring us a few bitches and get a party goin'? I said, it was a joke, but Long Johns took it serious, fuck me, Badmother, he said to me, three hundred blokes gaggin' for it, is this a proper riot or just a randy stag party, Badmother? And you and me pissed ourselves, din't we Studz? Just the thought of it, a knockin' shop in Block 5, packet of fags a shag, we'd have had ciggies for the rest of our lives, cudda set up a fuckin' tobacconists, Studz, what a laugh, and we pissed ourselves, I bet the pigs were laughin' too thinkin' bout 191, but ha! We'd already made the switch, little ball here, little ball there, and when yer lift the cup up nothin', the little tinfoil ball under yer fingernail, it's how I ripped off a couple of Japs once, Studz, the dickheads, but it was well thought out wannit?

Escaping is out of the question, at least until we start negotiating. I've got the beginnings of an idea but I better think it through, because if I take one wrong step I'll be coming out of here feet first. I've seen a reflection in the air con. It looks like a lens. So they can see us now. I've got to show them where the Basques are. I'll think of something. This Badmother's clever. And he's well informed. I'm shocked at how well. 'You know what, Long Johns? If they'd told me there were pants in the storeroom I'd have cut you top to bottom, but no, they'd run out,' and he slaps me on the back. At least there are intelligent people out there. If Badmother knows about the pants situation then he could find out about anything, anything at all. Niebla calls. He speaks to Badmother who tells him that in half an hour's time a committee of prisoners will meet with whoever they choose. 'There'll be three of us, me, Long Johns and the Poet, and there'll be one of you, starkers.' Niebla reasons that it would be better to meet in the security

zone, that nothing will happen to us, that he gives his word, but Badmother says no way, 'Your word ain't worth shit, you got half an hour, it's what I say or nothing.' Niebla agrees and says they might need more time, and Badmother spits he's got 'time to spare, and even more if you make me cut the hostages up, tosser.' He asks me how he was and I say he did well, 'Just right, firm but without provoking them,' I add. And I see a nuance in his smile I hadn't seen until then.

'Why you fucking looking at me like that?'

'Nothing, just a stupid thing.'

'Say it for fuck's sake.'

'Dunno, I saw a different smile on you.'

'You're a good bloke mate, but you don't know Badmother, no one knows me, not even Patri knew me.'

'Maybe you didn't let her.'

'Look cock-end, get this into your head, in my life you can only have one face, and this is it, otherwise you're finished.'

He drops his head and turns away from me. Studz looks at me with a frown and gestures that he's watching me. He does it from low down because I'm a foot taller than him. And it makes me shiver, as though he had me by my private parts with vulture's claws. For some reason it's not a feeling I get from Badmother or Smacks. Just from Studz. I've got to be careful with him. Badmother hasn't realised it, but he's one that can think too. What's the commotion? Everyone's running to the end of the wing, towards Block 4. They've come out of 177 and 193 to see what's happening. That's where the Basques are. I go up to them and tell them nothing's happening, hopefully they've seen me on the cameras; they'll understand if they watched it. I'm going to 217 as well. 'Don't worry, it's fine. Don't touch him alright?' They both say okay, but one of them is holding his blade at Blondie's throat. 'Watch out, because you'll answer to Badmother if you do anything stupid,' I repeat. He moves the blade away a little. But Blondie looks drawn. He knows these guys won't blink when the time comes. I can hear Studz's voice calling Badmother. If they saw it, someone will have noticed me going up to three cells, not all of them, just three. If they decide to come in, at least they'll know where they'll have to go to prevent a massacre. I can see Badmother running. Studz is waiting for him there, at the end of the wing, making a fuss. I should go. 'Long Johns thinks,' I hear him say. If I'm going to think I should know what I have to think about.

Something was wrong, very wrong. We could tell because Special Ops were racing about, assembling at the entrance to Block 5. I was taking steps to try and find Elena. The call from the social worker at the hotel had unsettled me, because that girl, in the emotional state she was in, could do any number of stupid things. Fermín was helping me.

‘I’ve got the Santander numbers, Armando. What shall I do?’

‘Call them, but be tactful, Fermín. See if the girl has been in touch with them, if there was anything she had to do today, but without worrying them.’

‘Okay, have you called the police?’

‘I’m going to, but it won’t be easy finding her. There’s a lot of pretty blonde girls out there. I reckon we’ll have to wait until she makes an appearance.’

José Utrilla hung up the phone and chivvied me: ‘Armando, the Special Ops guy wants to see us right away.’ At the ‘Operation Badmother’ command station it was pretty chaotic. Gerardo Niebla and one of his assistants were watching the monitor and giving orders via the microphones stuck to their lips. ‘Group up,’ ‘assault team ready at the line,’ ‘the bear is still in the cave.’ I could hardly understand a word, but it was clear the waiting was over. Something was happening that had forced Special Ops to intervene.

‘Can the cells be blocked off from the inside?’

Niebla’s question was directed at Utrilla and me. It was the chief that answered.

‘I don’t think so.’

Niebla gestured to us. We moved closer to the television and boy did we give a start. In Block 5 everyone was running. Their faces were on show, without the rudimentary hoods that had been made by order of Badmother.

‘What do you think?’

‘Did you order your men to take action?’

‘No.’

‘I don’t understand then.’

It was true, I didn’t understand what was going on. Niebla asked for the cameras to focus on 191. One of the prisoners on the door went into the cell and came out again. They were quizzing the ones coming back from Block 4, but the racket was so bad we couldn’t make out a single word, although we could discern the inmates’ strained faces. We saw Badmother run by.

Juan was there too. He'd taken his hood off and was passing in front of 191. He made no gesture.

'Follow him,' Niebla ordered.

But when it got to 215 the camera stopped; it couldn't sweep any further.

'Maybe not all the ETA men are in 191; they may have taken some out when we couldn't see them and moved them to Block 4.'

Niebla picked up the phone with a direct line to the Ministry.

'Yes Señor Minister... we don't know... I think they're in danger... we're ready.'

He finished speaking, adjusted the microphone again and notified everyone: 'Green alert, green alert.'

What the hell's going on? There's blood up the walls and on the floor. 'Let me through, for fuck's sake,' I shout, but they won't get out of the way. They're in a huddle and they're cheering someone on. 'Go on, go on!' they're screaming. I can't see Badmother. But Studz is there, his arms crossed over holding back two blokes, red-faced. There's no risk to the ETA lot, but what if the cops have been bold enough to come in? What if they've got one of them? I've got to get to the front. I elbow my way through. 'Get out the fucking way, shit heads,' I shout again. This reminds me of military service, when the post arrived at the camp and everyone wanted to be first to get their letters. 'Dear Juan, I hope this finds you well...' Elena has always been really conventional when it comes to writing. 'You're so bloody formal,' I've often said to her chidingly. 'It's just that I'm used to the templates at the office, Juan, don't be angry,' and she makes a face at me. Her boss fancies her. Thank God she quit that job. 'That bloke wants to get you into bed,' I warned her. She has always liked it when I'm jealous, it makes her feel she's important to me. But I know he looked at her legs and bum, and he wanted her to go on his trips with him 'in case I need to write a letter, Elena, okay?' But she always said no: 'find someone else if you need an escort,' and I would smother her in kisses. God, I'd give anything just to see you, my love. There's Badmother.

'Chill, Long Johns, it's fine. Nothing to worry about.'

On the ground there's two blokes soaked in blood, and there's nothing to worry about. Another one further away lies motionless. His face is like a mould of red wax.

'It's nothing, just a grudge fight.'

'Is that guy dead?'

'Deader than my great-granddad, Long Johns, he's reeking already.'

'And who are they?'

'Dumbo, from Block 4, and Legionnaire, from 5, one of them sells shit and the other buys it, remind you of anything?'

'Yep.'

'Like your brother, Long Johns, but more fucked up, they gave him pure talc.'

Legionnaire gets up, takes two steps and falls over again. His torso's a colander. Dumbo stays on the floor in a pool of blood, motionless. The first one that went down is carried off towards Block 5.

'And who was he, Badmother?'

'Dumbo's muscle, for fuck's sake, Legionnaire gave him a facelift.'

... Unbelievable, Studz, Long Johns said it like someone who din't want it to happen, the sly fucker, the thing is he had brains; Badmother, Dumbo's muscle's got the same hair as the blonde ETA bloke and they've carried him off whacking his dead body, if the Old Bill think he's one of them we're fucked, no negotiations or nothin', he said, and I said fuck you're right, remember Studz? You were runnin' like shit off a shovel, everyone went after the stiff, chill, stop, but no, they took him off like they were gonna throw him in a river and there was no way they were gonna stop, shit, the fuckin' idiots, you're gonna fuck it all up, I shouted, but I cudda been Saint fucking Peter and they wudna listened, like fuckin' madmen, eh Studz? I screamed my fuckin' head off all the way to Block 5 for nothin', even Smacks comin' outta 217 grabbed the stiff, gettin' blood all over himself, the tosser, who the fuck told him to leave his post, don't do it again or you'll have worms eatin' yer rotten meat tomorrow, yer fuckin' twat, and the look Smacks gave me, eh? Till I smacked him, you cock, you just cut people when I say, that's all you do, and don't fuck with Badmother again, I said, and his eyes went down, remember Studz? He was just a big pussy really, always clingin' on to me and incapable of bein' a man, a fuckin' lapdog, how he played us that Juan...

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